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This article was originally published in the Hopkins Insider.

April 7, 1999

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Like hearing aid-wearing President Clinton, the first generation to be raised on rock-n-roll is facing more hearing loss than its parents.

Bill Clinton was 46 when he entered the White House as the second youngest U.S. president in history. Five years later, he was wearing hearing aids in both ears at least occasionally. For instance, when he had to mingle in large crowds. He isn't alone. Although hearing loss is thought of as a condition that typically strikes seniors, more Americans are experiencing difficulties with hearing loss at an earlier age. Last year, a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that nearly 15 percent of school-aged children had hearing deficits at low or high frequencies.

But perhaps the most noticeable segment of the population to report difficulties in hearing, sensitivity to loud sounds and/or an incessant buzzing -- typical symptoms of hearing loss -- are so-called "baby boomers" in their 40s and 50s.

From 1971 to 1990, hearing problems among those between ages 45 and 64 jumped 26 percent, according to the National Health Interview Survey. There was also a 17 percent increase in the 18 to 44 age group. In California, where researchers surveyed 5,000 people, the rate of impairment jumped 150 percent between 1965 and 1994 among those in their 50s. It's easy to understand why: They and other baby boomers, after all, are the first generation to be born and raised on rock music, gas-powered lawn mowers, traffic gridlock and other everyday threats to our hearing.

Because loud noise doesn't cause pain until the sound reaches high decibels, people generally don't recognize noise as damaging until

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after the fact. If the ears hurt or bled when noise rose above a safe level, everyone would be more cognizant of the threat. But it doesn't take much to start a gradual damaging effect that can lead to partial or total hearing loss. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, being regularly exposed to sound levels above 70 decibels -- roughly the level of using a hair dryer, vacuum cleaner or gas lawn mower -- can begin to damage hearing.

How It Occurs

Most people lose their hearing slowly -- over a 15- to 20-year period - - because regular and repeated noise exposure damages the wonderfully complicated and intricate hair cells of the inner ear that interpret sound vibrations as words, music or other sounds. Unlike the hairs on top of your head, which can be sheared off and grown back, hair cells can't grow back because they are such highly developed, end-stage cells. Men are more likely to start being hearing impaired about a decade before women, since they have commonly held more industrial and transportation jobs, which produce consistently high noise levels. Hearing loss is not just the inability to sense sound. Impaired pitch resolution, for example, means the ear doesn't sort out complex sounds in speech, so the brain receives a sort of mishmash. For instance, people say they can hear but can't discriminate what is being said. Typically, the first to be affected are high tones, which include many of the most common sounds in spoken English -- including those produced by the lips and teeth, such as p, s, f, t and d, and sh, ch, h and soft c. This is one reason why hearing loss can be so frustrating. Because you're losing parts of words, hearing a sentence can look like this: "Can you un er an i e e e wi ou e igh one?" (Can you understand this sentence without the high tones?) Mid tones, created with the tongue and base of the throat -- including sounds such as ka, la, rr -- typically drop off next. This is why you'll hear a lot of people say they can't hear someone, but when the speaker increases volume, the person with the hearing problem says, "Don't shout at me." What they need is to have soft sounds boosted and loud sounds muffled.

What to Do

Because early noise exposure is reflected in hearing loss later in life, preventing damage in the first place is the wisest thing to do. Remove yourself from excessive noise. It may sound obvious, but it's usually not practiced. Advice: An environment is too loud if you have to shout to be heard.

Wear earplugs when you must work around loud noise, such as operating a lawn mower. To be effective, earplugs must block the ear canal, creating an airtight seal. They come in different sizes and are typically made of foam that expands to create the seal. Earmuffs cover the entire outside of the ear and are also helpful. However, cotton is worthless for keeping noise out.

Use personal headsets responsibly. If someone standing near you can hear the music from your headset, it's too loud.

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